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ABSTRACT

Drawing information from federal statistical sources, this digest summarizes recent changes in rural demographic and economic conditions relevant to rural school systems. Since the early 1990s, the U.S. economy has been strong, and rural areas have been growing at the same rate or faster than the nation's economic pace. Benefiting from the steady growth of employment, income, and local revenue, some rural schools may be able to improve their financial conditions, although the stability of such improvement is uncertain. Since 1990, real income has increased for rural workers at all educational levels, but gains were greater for women and minorities than for men and Whites. However, rural public school teachers showed slight decreases in real income. Despite rural income gains, the poverty rate, the rate of those just above the poverty line, and the number of working poor have remained consistently higher in rural than urban areas in the 1990s. Rural schools must develop effective strategies to alleviate the difficulties facing poor children. Also relevant to rural schools is the growth in rural population in the 1990s. In addition to overall population growth, rural areas have seen increases in the younger population, minority groups, and immigrants. Recent immigrants present particular challenges to rural schools as they tend to have greater numbers of children and lower educational attainment and may require instruction in English as a second language. (Contains 12 references.) (SV)

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Gary G. Huang

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Sociodemographic Changes: Promises and Problems for Rural Education

Gary G. Huang

In the 1990s the United States experienced one of the most robust growth cycles in the economy since World War II. Major indicators of socioeconomic well-being show that rural regions have benefited from the economic expansion. Favorable changes in rural demographics and economic conditions both promise opportunities and raise questions about public programs, including rural schools. This Digest, which draws information from federal statistics, summarizes changes relevant to rural education and calls for more research into their impact on rural education.

Two points must be noted. First, aggregated information often masks local diversity. Readers should keep in mind that this Digest is merely an overview of nationwide changes in rural conditions. Local policymakers must employ in-depth analysis of unique local circumstances as viewed against the background of broader developments outlined here. Second, due to the farming and rural manufacturing industries' close ties to the global marketplace, rural economies are vulnerable to the impact of changes in the volatile international market. Local policymakers and educators need to be prudent in planning for their schools' long-term development.

Employment and Income Grow in Rural Areas

The nation's economy has continued to grow throughout this decade, though it slowed recently under the influence of the international financial crisis. Inflation has not accelerated, consumer prices remain stable, and employment rates continue to be high. Remarkably, while economic expansion in the 1980s left rural areas behind, in the 1990s, rural areas have been growing at the same rate if not faster than the nation overall. Benefiting from the steady growth of employment, income, and local revenue, some rural schools now seem poised to improve their financial conditions, though such improvement is not certain.

The rural economy is sensitive to fluctuations in manufacturing and export rates. Rural workers are largely employed in manufacturing industries and many farm products depend on export. The strong-to-moderate growth of manufacturing in the past two years helped to raise the rural employment and real income levels. The demand for American exports and agriculture-related services has also led to growing employment in the rural labor market. The tight rural labor market may result in further income growth in rural areas. How long such growth can be sustained, however, seems unclear in light of the dramatic downturn of the global economy in 1998. Local education planners must use caution when making decisions related to large-scale projects requiring a prolonged supply of resources.

Annual average employment growth was 1.6 percent in nonmetro areas over the past several years, twice the rate in urban areas (Hamrick, 1997). More than two million nonmetro jobs were added in the past four years.

The tight labor market led to rising earnings in rural areas (Gibbs, 1997). Real weekly earnings for rural wage and salary workers rose 1.8 percent between 1990 and 1996. Rural earning growth was especially strong in the Midwest and South, at 3.8 percent and 2.3 percent respectively, but was stagnant in the Northeast and West.

Rural earning gains were uneven across demographic groups. Women in rural areas saw their earnings rise 6.2 percent, compared with virtually unchanged earnings among rural men. This gender difference could be attributed to rural women having attained more education and, therefore, better-paying jobs than rural men. More women have delayed marriage and childbearing, completed more schooling, and participated in the labor force (Rogers, 1996).

In the same period, rural Hispanics and Blacks averaged real income gains of 3.4 percent and 3.1 percent respectively, better than the gains by rural Whites (1.5 percent), and in sharp contrast with the loss among urban Hispanics and Blacks (-4.2 percent and -1.2 percent respectively). Completing high school did not make as great a difference to rural earnings as it did to urban earnings.

The rural workforce in general, however, still earns less than its urban counterpart. In 1996, rural workers earned only about four-fifths of what urban workers earned.

While the general population has gained in real income in the 1990s, teaching professionals—especially those in rural areas and inner cities—have not (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). State and local policymakers have to face this issue if they want to use the increases in local revenue for school improvement.

Poverty and the Working Poor in Rural Areas

A severe challenge facing rural schools is continuing high poverty and its complex distribution among the rural population. Rural poverty seems to be mildly alleviated amid the economic growth, though still widely uneven across demographic categories (Nord, 1997). The overall poverty rate in rural areas declined slightly since 1993. In 1995, the rural household poverty rate was 15.6 percent, compared to the urban rate of 13.4 percent. This rural-urban gap has remained constant since 1991. Moreover, a large portion of rural residents (26.3 percent) lived just above the poverty line, compared with the urban rate of 18.2 percent. Such a large proportion of the population having a marginal income status makes rural families particularly vulnerable to changes in national and regional economies and setbacks in their personal lives.

Rural Blacks and Native Americans suffer from more prevalent poverty. The groups' poverty rates were 34.8 percent and 35.6 percent, compared with 12.2 percent among rural non-Hispanic Whites. Yet, because of the large White majority in rural areas, almost two-thirds of the rural poor were non-Hispanic Whites. The poverty rate for rural children in 1995 was 22.4 percent, equivalent to 3.2 million children living in families below the poverty line. Among people living in rural female-headed families, the poverty rate was 39.3 percent in 1995. More than 60 percent of the rural poor were in families with one or more working members.

Poverty reduces children's opportunity to learn, both in the family and at school. Schools in rural areas need to find effective strategies to alleviate the difficulties facing poor children. Even more importantly, state governments and local officials must work out broader programs to offer more generous support for the poor, including social services and job opportunities with decent wages.

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Population Growth and Net Migration Gains in Rural Areas

Rural school enrollment may grow over the coming years due to the emerging pattern of population growing faster in rural areas than in other places. In step with the rising economic tide, the population of rural America has grown since 1990, largely due to migration (Beale, 1997). Between 1990 and 1996, the nonmetro population grew by 5.9 percent, which is more than twice the increase that occurred during the entire 1980s (2.7 percent). Half of the nonmetro population growth since 1990 is attributable to a net inflow of 1.5 million people from metro areas (Hansen, 1997). The net gain from migration contributes to the rising per capita income because in-migrants have a higher average income than do out-migrants, especially in counties with amenities such as mild climate, beaches, or lakes (Cromartie, 1997).

While almost all rural counties had some population growth, the following types had relatively greater growth: counties with economies focusing on services and trade, retirement destination counties, and counties with high levels of recreational activities. On the other hand, counties specializing in manufacturing and counties depending on farming and mining have experienced modest to slow growth in population.

In rural America, the number of younger people (under age 65) is growing faster than is the number of older people (over age 65). The current age-differentiated growth rate sharply differs from that of the 1980s, when the number of older people increased at rates many times higher than that of younger people. These statistics suggest that the 1990s population rebound in rural areas largely involves younger people. Presumably, the school-age population in rural areas will increase as a result of this demographic change. Program planning for rural schools may entail examining local population trends against the national pattern, in order to predict future enrollment and allocate related resources.

Immigrants and Minorities in Rural Areas

Education for immigrants and minorities, who are characterized by young age and low education compared to their counterparts elsewhere, is a pressing issue for rural adult education programs as well as elementary and secondary school systems. During 1980-90, rural minorities fell behind rural whites and urban minorities on key measures of social and economic conditions, including poverty, income, occupational status, and educational attainment. A comprehensive report of federal census data concerning rural minorities in that period is available (see Swanson, 1996). New data regarding rural minorities in the 1990s, though not systematic, suggests mild improvement of socioeconomic conditions among Blacks and Hispanics.

While most immigrants (about 95 percent) settle in large metro areas, those who move to rural areas concentrate in a few locations (Effland & Butler, 1997). For example, in the South, Texas is home to 17 percent of the total nonmetro immigrant population of the United States. The West accounts for about 7 percent of the nation's nonmetro immigrants. Overall, immigrants to rural areas comprise only 2 percent of the total rural population. The single largest group of rural immigrants is Mexican, whose share in nonmetro immigrants has increased from 48 percent in the 1980s to 57 percent in the 1990s.

Recent immigrants in rural areas tend to be younger than immigrants in metro areas; they are also, on average, younger than rural natives. This demographic feature demands greater spending in rural public schools, especially in places with concentrated immigrant populations.

Significantly, immigrants in rural areas have attained, on average, less education relative to urban immigrants. High school completion rates, for example, are lower among rural immigrants aged 25 and older than among their urban counterparts. And this gap seems to be widening: metro immigrants who have entered the country since 1980 report increasingly higher rates of high school completion, whereas completion rates among recent nonmetro immigrants remain low. Thus, adult basic education and job training are in heavy demand in rural areas. These programs often require other services such as instruction in English as a second language, job location, and child care. With limited albeit reviving rural fiscal capacities, local resources will not be sufficient. Federal and state support must be provided to help rural school systems serve communities with concentrations of immigrant families and children.

Implications for Rural Schools

Rural U.S. communities face both opportunities and challenges that result from the recent demographic and economic developments. On the one hand, rural areas enjoy the relatively strong economic recovery that followed the depression of the 1980s, as illustrated in the many baseline indicators. Policymakers and communities should take advantage of this upswing to provide new resources for school improvement, ranging from facility maintenance, staffing, and curriculum improvement to serving special needs of at-risk groups. Telecommunications technology now makes it possible for professionals to work away from urban centers. Rural communities must take advantage of both the current economic recovery and technological developments to sustain their growth. They should focus on updating school programs to prepare youngsters for future development.

On the other hand, uneven growth across geographic regions and demographic categories prompts many serious questions. As a recent California study illustrates, intertwined issues of immigration, poverty, and substandard work and living conditions among rural working families put tremendous pressures on public services, including schools (Taylor, Martin & Fix, 1998). In communities with extractive industries (e.g., farming and mining) or places with large numbers of working poor and recent immigrants, depression has persisted for decades. School systems in those communities are fiscally very weak and typically face grave problems of deep poverty and poor academic performance. The future still looks gloomy for children there. The need for strong state and federal support seems inevitable. Active collaboration across levels and agencies of government could remove the barriers blocking these children and their families from reaching educational equity.

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